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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the difficulties of learners of Japanese as a second language from non-kanji backgrounds and the special difficulties they encounter in trying to learn the kanji writing system. It is asserted that most teachers of Japanese as a second language do not spend enough time on kanji teaching, with the students typically forced to try to learn much of it on their own. Difficulties encountered in learning kanji include the following: kanji complexity that led to problems with memory, combination, pronunciation, and making proper shapes; negative feelings such as a lack of confidence, poor self-evaluation, helplessness, and worries; and difficulties with the teacher. Students were often given little explanation or guidance and were confronted with a mass of unfamiliar lines and rules to memorize. Learners tried to overcome these problems with self-encouragement, flexible thinking, and a new appreciation for the difficulty of the task and the determination to succeed. It is concluded that the most effective teaching strategy does not try to turn learners into "successful" language learners but to come to terms with each student's strengths and weaknesses and work with the opportunities and limitations inherent therein. Most importantly, learners must be encouraged not to take charge of the learning process but to focus on their responsibility to learn through hard work and flexibility. (Contains 27 references.) (KFT)

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Promoting learner autonomy: Learning from the Japanese language learners' perspectives

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In recent language teaching arenas, the concept of "autonomy" has been given increasing attention because of the way it can promote a situation where the learners' ability to learn is improved. However, learner autonomy is understood in different ways in different contexts. In this paper, the perspectives of learners coming from non kanji areas will be given a voice expressing the various obstacles that occur in the process of kanji learning. Also, the paper looks at ways in which the teachers' role in this process can be improved in order to promote learner autonomy.

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In recent language teaching arenas, the concept of "autonomy" has been given increasing attention because of the way it can promote a situation where the learners' ability to learn is improved. However, learner autonomy is understood in different ways in different contexts. In this paper, the perspectives of learners coming from non kanji areas will be given a voice expressing the various obstacles that occur in the process of kanji learning. Also, the paper looks at ways in which the teachers' role in this process can be improved in order to promote learner autonomy.

For most learners from non-kanji areas, the kanji writing system seems to be problematic because of its complete difference from an alphabet system (Sato, 1992 ; Tollini, 1994). However, from my experience in Japanese as a Second/Foreign language (JSL/JFL) classes, teachers often do not spend much time on kanji teaching, and usually most kanji learning is left for students to do on their own.

It is my belief that a consideration of the learning process should focus on how learners activate their insight through the learning process, rather than considering external viewpoints of institutional modes.

Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy seems to be based on the learners' awareness of their responsibility for their own learning. (In the literature, instead of awareness, various terms are used such as willingness, ability, capacity, attitude, acceptance) (e.g. : Holec, 1981 ; Brookfield, 1985 ; Boud, 1988 ; Wenden, 1991 ; Dickinson, 1995 ; Little, 1995a). Dickinson(1989) said that " the main key for autonomous learning is

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the concept of responsibility for learning "(p9). Autonomous learning seems to have an image of isolated learning in which learners deal with their complete learning process on their own, through planning, performing and evaluating(Little,1995a).

As regards the above point, Benson & Voller(1997) identified " the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning " (p25) as one aspect of autonomy.

What then is considered as "the internal psychological capacity "? According to Wenden(1991), autonomous learners are " self-confident learners" who believe in their ability to learn and to self-direct or manage their learning "(p53). Dickinson & Carver(1980) also identify autonomy as the development of self-confidence and awareness by the learners of their own progress. Furthermore, in Ushioda(1996)'s terms, " learners' capacity for self-motivations " was cited.

On the other hand, not only psychological aspects, but also the needs of social interactions have been considered in the context of autonomous learning. Little(1995a) insisted that autonomy can be developed by interdependence rather than by independence. Thomson(1992) also identified one of the characteristics of self-directed learners as " being able to set up a favorable climate of learning for themselves by collaborating with peers, instructors, and resource persons ".

Perspectives of Learners from Non-Kanji Areas

According to Fukuda, Hirataka & Fukuda(1995), learners from non-kanji areas see kanji from a bottom-up perspective which moves from feeling - perception - recognition - association of the meanings. Tollini(1994) claimed that kanji with many strokes do

not mean that they are difficult to remember, in fact sometimes they are easy if they can be divided into several components. Sato(1992) also said that many strokes do not equal memorisation difficulty. On the other hand, Toyoda (1995a,b) reported from her survey results that learners from non-kanji areas tended to have difficulties in retaining what they have memorised rather than in memorising the kanji itself. In any case, the learners need to be supported mentally against feelings of despair, endlessness and frustration when they encounter difficulties (Shimosegawa, 1984 ; Kaiho,1990 ; Sato,1992 ; Noguchi,1995). Tollini(1992 ; 1994) claimed that beginner level learning tends to a meaningless, mnemonic activity. For beginners, kanji are not seen as a system and every single character is an unique and unrelated individual letter. On the contrary, experienced learners are able to recognize the structures and the meanings of kanji, and also use their knowledge for inferencing or memorising(Sato,1992).

Kaiser(1996) insisted that foreign learners are burdened with the unfamiliarity of the vocabulary for learning kanji. Tollini(1992) claimed that foreign learners do not have enough existing knowledge about kanji , therefore, first they need to be given clues on how to learn kanji. Moreover, Flaherty(1991) said that the level of familiarity is a major factor in how kanji learning is processed.

Purpose

According to Holec (1981), autonomy is the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning. Autonomous learners are considered to be learners who are capable of making independent decisions about their learning processes (Holec, 1981 ; Dickinson,1995). However, this definition seems to have understood of autonomy as a process of isolated individual learning,

and tended to focus on external forms of learning (such as independent work vs groupwork, teacher-centered vs learner-centered, Western attitudes vs Asian attitudes, etc.).

This paper considers data taken from retrospective interviews from learners from non kanji areas on their kanji learning.

The purpose of the study is to gather learners' perspectives on : 1) what sort of problems JSL(JFL)learners experience in their learning processes, and 2) how learners try to overcome their problems.

Informants

Japanese language adult learners from non-kanji areas were interviewed from 1996 - 1998. The total number of the learners were 20 (beginners level=11, Male:Female=7:4 ; pre-intermediate level=11, Male:Female=7:4).

17 learners were in their early 20's, one learner was in his mid 30's, and the other two learners were in their mid 40's. All had experience of learning Japanese at university level as a formal subject in their own countries(America, Australia, Canada, and Spain).

Method

Interviews were semi-structured, and interviewees were asked individually about their learning experiences, such as their learning problems, strategies, perspective changes, etc. All interviews were conducted in English, which were tape-recorded and transcribed. The data was collected in Japan.

The transcriptions were divided into categories by and each content was coded. Then, the data was described on the basis of the above analysis.

The Results and Discussions

1. What sort of problems JSL(JFL) learners experience in their learning processes ?

The learners expressed their problems such as ; frustrations, helplessness, or worries in learning difficulties. The problems referred to three major components : (1) kanji complexity itself, (2) learners' own negative feeling, and (3) struggles with their expectations of the teachers.

(1) Kanji Complexity

Forgetting : All learners complain about forgetting the kanji because of their complexity and resemblance to one another. This problem overlapped with Toyoda(1995a,b)'s quantitative research data as previously stated.

Here are some extracts:

"The more the learners know kanji, the harder it is to keep in their long term memory".

"It is very frustrating when I get the test and I know that I've learnt the kanji, but cannot remember it. I've forgotten."

"Even though I've written those kanji fifty times, sometimes after only one hour I have already forgotton them."

In fact, the learners' common strategy is writing down kanji repeatedly.

"practice by muscles rather than brain."

"I have to write kanji over and over again."

"I actually cannot learn by looking at kanji in a computer. I have to write it."

Combination and pronounciation : One of the reasons which makes kanji learning difficult seems to be the complexity of the relationship between combination and pronounciation.

"one kanji has different ways of being pronounced in different combinations"

"Sometimes you memorise one reading, and then see another one on the street which has a completely different sound. With any other language, I would at least be able to read it and pronounce it, even though I didn't understand what it said. But with Japanese I am often given a text full of kanji that I haven't studied yet. It frustrates me, because I am in the same situation as if I haven't studied Japanese at all. I can't understand and I can't even pronounce the words."

"I stopped learning kanji for a while, because it was too complicated. The only method of learning was memory work. I had no choice."

Making proper shapes : Because kanji consists of various components and is completely different from alphabetical writing, some of the beginner level learners especially identify difficulties in making proper shapes.

"we have to write lots of lines in tiny spaces."

"troubles in drawing the kanji in proper perspective and proportion."

(2) Negative feeling

The learners express their negative feelings towards themselves and their learning. Concerning the present situation and their ability, the learner sometimes come to feel no confidence, negative self-evaluation, helplessness,or worries.

The examples are ;

No confidence

"I am very bad at kanji. Sometimes I am ashamed. I wish I knew them better but I can't do anything about it."

Negative self-evaluation

"I'm slow and the progress I've made is far too slow."

"I have been taught already, then I should know that already, and I don't. It feels like a failure."

Helplessness

"I think how everything is going to be. Am I going able to read a whole Japanese textbook properly? Because I've always forgotton kanji. So, it seems like a never ending task at the moment. Just a matter of going over and over."

Worries

"I do get frustrated. Because I'm going to learn a lot, but lots more I don't know yet. I worry about it. It could be too hard for me when I heard that the average Japanese person doesn't know all the kanji."

(3) Struggles with the teacher in classroom learning

Some of the learners have suffered from their classroom learning.

Let go problems : The fact was some of the learners did not get any ideas on how to learn kanji when they started. Their learning was concentrated on rather mechanical practice without being given any explanations from their teachers. These learners had been left to learning kanji on their own, and therefore, often had no ideas about kanji origins or components (including radicals). They had to face a "mass of lines" and struggled for a long time. On the other hand, others have learnt some hints of kanji learning. They tended to not have so many problems in their beginning stages.

"At the beginning, it was purely memory work. I just concentrated on the Japanese reading (kunyomi) of each kanji. I could see particular kanji in different words. So, I only had to remember them."

"My teacher showed us pictures about where kanji came from. It helped a lot more to remember, because we could associate and make stick in our head."

Mismatch with the teacher expectations : Some people became demotivated because of their test problems. One learner talked of his depression when he got bad results in his tests despite his efforts. The problem was that without knowing her students' level, the new teacher always gave tests regularly.

"At that point in time, when I kept doing like I'm not learning anything. I was terrible on every test I got back. It's times like that, I think I should just forget it. I felt I kept feeling I was just ready right away not to have to deal with the language."

Another learner also reflected his university study and said,

"I feel my blood pressure rise when I think about it(studying kanji at university). We were expected ro learn 240 kanji with various readings each week. We were given sheets containing 15 to 20 new kanji characters with a rather inadequate explanation. Then, the following week, we were always given a test. It was a nightmare. There was no time to practise and to make mistakes, as is normal and proper in true learning. There was little opportunity for stress-free consolidation and always the next week another 15 to 20 kanji !"

Once thinking to apply for a postgraduate program, there was a learner who has decided not to commence. He said,

"I had thought that a university program with many exams would force me to progress. But upon reflection, I feel that it can demotivate and frustrate. Exams can become barriers rather than steps."

He also expressed his struggles that teachers did not understand his pace of learning.

"I feel that the teachers do not understand my struggles. Due to time restrictions with courses, the teacher is expected to cover a certain amount of material in a limited time. But so often I come up

against what I will call, for lack of a better term, the sponge syndrome. There are 15 people in the class and each person has a certain amount of sponge. And when the sponge is full, it can't hold more water (information). The teacher, however, keeps giving more information, so the student becomes frustraed."

In most of the cases, teachers are concentrating on how to organize the materials and how to teach according to their curriculum. However, what seems to be most important to consider is how much information students can digest and what they expect from classroom learning. Japanese teachers often tend to set up short tests for kanji learning on a regular basis. Although some of students accept these type of tests, it is not to everyone's taste. If it gives learners a great deal of pressure, it might cause demotivation of the learners instead of facilitation.

2. How do learners try to overcome their problems ?

The learners' conscious reflection seem to help their learning progress. Little(1995b) claimed that development capacity of critical reflection is fundamental to autonomous learning.

(1) Self-encouragement

The learners reflect on their own learning process and on what they have done, and encourage themselves.

Examples are:

"I have invested too much time, too much thinking. Once you have started and have spent a certain amount of time on it, it is not worth dropping out. It's frustrating but there are many frustrating things in life as well."

"I feel in the past four years I have learnt a lot. I should continue."

(2) Flexible thinking and regulating self

Bandura(1986) defined people's belief in their capabilities as self-

efficacy. Bandura said,

"The human capability for reflective self-consciousness provides a prominent of human agency. By reflecting on their experiences and on what they know, people can derive knowledge about themselves and the world around them. They also evaluate and alter their own thinking by reflective thought."(Bandura, 1986, p1).

The learners have learnt a flexible way of thinking through the process of learning in order to regulate themselves.
Examples are:

"At the beginning, I wanted to learn everything very fast. Now, I realise that it is impossible. I have to go step by step. I cannot jump."

"I have the whole of my life. It's a long way to go. So, I would like to do my best of my own pace."

(3) Positive self-belief

As Bandura(1986) noted, the learners' trust in their potentials, in other words, positive self-belief to manage their learning and achieve their objectives seems to be crucial for learners learn autonomously. Ridley(1997) said what learners believe about themselves is crucially important to their capacity for self-motivation.
Reflecting their goal, the learners have realized their own responsibility as learners.

"Now it is getting a little harder, but I really want to master the language. So, that's my intensive. I'll just keep practising. Hopefully, one day, I will be able to remember them all."

(4) Realization of challenge and commitment

When the learners started learning Japanese, the learners were motivated to learn something new. In the learning process, the learners have commit themselves more seriously and feel a bigger challenge than when they started. They have to reflect on where they are now, and think about how far there is to go.

"At the beginning, I found it very interesting, good fun. Now, I realize that it's a bigger challenge than I thought."

Affective Outcomes

Although the learners have problems and frustrations, they find enjoyment in learning. Also, they feel self-satisfaction with their progress. Moreover, they realize what they have achieved so far and then the realization brings confidence. These positive affective outcomes lead the learners to self-motivation towards further learning processes, as positive affective outcomes, enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and self-confidence are identified.

Here are some examples:

Enjoyment

"It is very difficult, but is more interesting. I want to keep going."

"At first it was a bit of fun, but now, I am seriously interested, because there's meaning in it(kanji)."

"I enjoy writing by myself. I would like to be able to write like Japanese people do. It is really beautiful. That is the reason why I do not like computer learning. On computer, I only need to click. I would like to enjoy my learning process."

Self-satisfaction

"I have moved forward slowly. I feel satisfied with the level I have achieved."

Self-confidence

"I started to be very good at guessing. My guesses became very educated and became really closer approximations of the meaning."

"I am feeling braver."

Expecting Teachers'Support

As previously described, teachers' understanding seems to be a very important factor of whether learners can be motivated or not. The learners have expectations and desires as regards receiving support and understanding from their teachers.

Examples from the extracts are:

"Teachers understand your level and encourage you to care. They help you with enthusiasm to accomplish things you would never have thought of accomplishing. That is what I would like to expect from teachers."

"Teachers should have learnt at least one language other than their own. That's the only way to understand truly what their students are going through and with the knowledge gained through experience give appropriate help."

"I have to say that the best teacher was an Australian who knew exactly what we were going through and who gave us all sorts of useful insights, examples and cultural explanations."

Conclusion

What are the implications for teachers as regards promoting learner autonomy ? In my opinion, learner training has tended to place too much emphasis on technical factors such as learner strategies. Lier(1996) claimed that " a teacher cannot simply transmit the sorts of skills and attitudes to learning that are required, nor can he or she train learners in the way that recruits are trained to march in step"(p93). Gremmo & Riley(1995) also said, "the aim of learner-training is not to transform all learners into "successful" language learners, . . . but rather to help learners to

come to terms with their strengths and weakness to learn a language efficiently"(p158).

From the analysis of this paper, I would like to suggest that the most important point is the learners' trust in their potential for development of autonomy and awareness of their capacity to be able to make a positive learning process on their own. I believe " the concept of responsibility for learning " focuses on learners' awareness of responsibility for their role as learners rather than the form of taking charge of their learning process. Autonomous learning tends to be misunderstood as isolated individual learning. As opposed to the above notion, it can be assumed that the more autonomous learners become, the more they seek social interaction with others. In this account, autonomous learning may involve not an external (space/time) free environment, but internal flexibility. Moreover, teachers need to take into consideration how learners make their internal/external learning environment to suit themselves by adjusting, amending, and renewing their learning process cycle. In terms of making efforts to understand the learners' perspectives, teachers need to improve their own quality of teaching and share ideas with their learners for autonomous learning and teaching. In this respect, teachers are not just facilitators or helpers, but participants of learning.

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